

## Wrestling with God<sup>1</sup>

We have before us one of the most fascinating and mysterious stories in the Bible. Jacob's past has finally caught up with him. He has to confront brother, Esau, whom he has defrauded. Jacob, you may remember, cheated his brother out of the family birthright. In doing so, Jacob placed himself as the decisive offspring who would carry God's promise forward. How can you steal such a thing? Well, Jacob managed and has had to flee the country to keep Esau from wringing his neck. But now Jacob needs to come home. God needs him back in Israel so the work of God's people goes forward. And Jacob needs to face his brother, Esau. His big hairy macho outdoorsman-type brother.

Jacob wages a charm offensive by sending in stages everything he owns—flocks, herds, family members—as gifts to soften up Esau. But now Jacob is out of livestock and the reckoning with Esau is in the morning. Jacob spends one last night along under the stars at the river ford.

In the middle of the night a shadowy figure of a man attacks Jacob. They fight for hours. Jacob is wounded and ever after walks with a limp. Despite injury, Jacob clutches the man and demands the strangers' blessing. The stranger asks Jacob's

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on March 8, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

name and blesses him by granting him a new name, "Israel," which means "one who wrestles with God."

What's it all mean? What's it mean for us? I'd like to propose that this story reminds us that having a relationship with God, being a disciple of Jesus Christ, means that at least sometimes we will struggle with God.

Think. All the great figures in the Bible had to struggle and give up something. Jesus himself struggled on the night before his crucifixion in the Garden of Gethsemane. "Couldn't, Lord, there be any other way to correct the course that humanity has headed down other than by sacrificing my life?" Jesus so struggled that sweat like big droplets of blood fell off his face. Abraham also struggled at the request that he sacrifice Isaac. Moses struggled with God on several occasions over how the Hebrews would be led to the Promised Land. David begged God to spare the child that was born to he and Bathsheba. Mary had to relinquish her reputation and control over her future. Paul prayed unsuccessfully that God would release him from a debilitating "thorn in the flesh."

The Bible and, I believe, history is replete with examples of believers who find that God wants them to do something that they really, really don't want to do or that they feel shouldn't do. And there's a struggle.

Why is this? Why do we find ourselves at odds with God? One reason is that God is different from us. You would think that it is so obvious, so not needing to be repeated, that God is simply different from you and me. God is beyond us. Bigger than us. Wiser.

It's amazing how each this is to see God as a being who is pretty much like us. Way back in the third century, Clement of Alexandria observed that if horses were religious they would draw shapes of their god's that would all look curiously like horses. Oxen would envision gods that had a distinctly ox-like look to them.

The sociological researcher, Robert Bellah, famously wrote about a young lady named Sheila who didn't go to church, but who had her own little religion which she called, "Sheilaism." When Sheila found herself in distress, she'd listen for the guidance of her own little voice. It was Sheila's insight into life, Sheila's wants, and Sheila's values that constituted her personal religion—Sheilaism.

Now Sheila may sound naïve. But how often do you and I assume that God is a big version of you or me? We hunt for a church that feels suited for us—comfortable. No one goes to a church that is agonizingly different and strange.

I'll tell you an interesting insight that comes from conducting Bible studies over the years. When people read large tracks of the Bible for the first time, they invariably remark that their impression of the whole Bible is that it has a lot of stuff in there that shouldn't be in the Bible.

The more you and I get to know God, the more we run into facets of his being that are different, more wise, more loving, more righteous, than we could even imagine on our own.

So, to find that God's will for us is strange and disconcerting shouldn't surprise us.

The other reason why struggle is a part of this Christian life is because God, while quite different, also has become one of us. God has come into the world in Jesus who is our friend and a fellow human being.

Isn't it interesting that the mysterious man who is somehow the presence of God with Jacob isn't a better wrestler? These two are so evenly matched that they seem to wrestle to an exhausting draw by daybreak.

Do you remember the conversation between God and Moses at the burning bush when God is telling Moses that he wants him to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt? It's amazing how much God puts up with Moses' excuse-making, evasion, and manipulation. It's like parents talking with a 13 year old. It's amazing how God

doesn't overwhelm us with superior wisdom and power. Instead he talks with us; reasons with us; listens to us; struggles with us.

So, on the eve of Jacob's reconciliation with his brother, Esau, he has an encounter with God that is a perfect example of the inevitability of struggle in our walk with Christ.

What's it all mean? This all has meaning for your and my lives of prayer.

First, an extended season of wrestling between ourselves and God is normal. Expect it. God works with us by stretching us molding us, and pruning us. Don't forget God's people "Israel" are named "wrestlers with God."

Second, learn the prayer of release. Try these words: "Father, I abandon myself into your hands, do with my life whatever you will. I am willing to go where you send me, to do what you request, to believe what you reveal to me. Let your will, O Lord, be done in me." Jesus prayed like this in Gethsemane when he said, "Not my will, but thine be done."

Finally, learn to pray the prayer of thanksgiving for new life. After Jacob wrestled with the shadowy figure he faced his brother, Esau. Jacob made his way home and his sons became the 12 tribes of Israel. In other words, God's work in Jacob went forward.

Out of our wrestling and relinquishment also comes new life. Look for it. Learn to receive it with gratitude.

Let's indeed pray that way right now.

Dear God: your thoughts are not our thoughts. Your ways are not our ways. And sometimes we just don't understand.

Why you have permitted what you have permitted.

Why you ask us to release our grasp on some things.

Why you direct us as you have.

Help us, Lord, to understand and to obey, and to thank you for new life. And now we abandon ourselves to your love.

Help us release control to you. We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.